

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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Matthew 17:1-9 (NRSV)

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. [2] And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. [3] Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. [4] Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." [5] While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" [6] When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. [7] But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." [8] And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

[9] As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

LISTEN

You don't listen to me!

How many times have wives said that to their husbands or visa versa? How many times have children said that to their parents? You don't listen to me.

And how do we respond to that charge? "Why I've heard every word that you've said." And they say something like, "Yes, you've heard, but you don't listen. You're tuning me out."

There's a big difference between hearing and listening. Sometimes we can hear what a person says, but we don't appreciate the importance of what they say. Our minds are focused on something else; we have a way of understanding the world that prevents us from focusing on what the other person is saying.

All of us have a point of view that acts as a kind of filter when someone is speaking to us. We may have a particular desire or a particular political view or a particular religious belief. And no matter what the other person says to us, in some cases we just won't be able to really listen. We will hear what they say, but our experience will prevent us from really listening.

Sometimes this inability to listen can get us into big trouble. For example, in a marriage it can cause a relationship to break down. In politics it can keep leaders from working together in productive ways. Sometimes a lack of communication can even cause nations to go to war.

To paraphrase Jesus we might say, “If only we had ears to hear and listen.” If only we could not only hear but also listen to what the other person is saying the world would be a better place.

This is especially true when it comes to faith. Quite often we talk too much and listen too little.

INTERRUPTED BY GOD

In our lesson for today this is the problem with Peter. He gives a long speech about how they should build shrines on the mountain to commemorate their wonderful experience ... one for Moses, one for Elijah and one for Jesus.

But, Peter’s speech is interrupted. He’s interrupted by God! God tells the disciples that Jesus is his beloved Son with whom He is well pleased and that they should do less talking and more listening.

Sometimes when I am in a church meeting, and someone is droning on and on I have to wonder if we’re talking too much and listening too little. Does God really want us to do this? If God were to interrupt our meetings, what would God tell us? Would God be pleased with us?

I think God would tell us what He said on the Mount long ago. Listen to Jesus instead of the sound of your own voice. It’s not about you and what you want. It’s about Jesus and what He wants. Jesus is my Son. Listen to him.

Most Christians know that we should listen to Jesus, that Jesus is (as the Bible puts it) the “way, the truth and the life.” But, how can we separate the words of Jesus from our own words? How can we really hear that word that comes from above and beyond us?

BLENDED CHRISTIANITY

Quite often when the gospel is preached in a particular culture, elements of that culture are blended with Christianity so that the message is distorted.

Sometimes very different religions are even blended together. For example in Haiti sometimes element of Voodoo and Christianity are blended together.

You catch a glimpse of a similar struggle in Paul's letters to the Corinthians. They seem to be blending elements of the mystery religions that were common in Corinth with the Christian faith.

The result is a church that is confused and in conflict. Christ is the head of the body, the church. But, if the body does not listen to the head, what happens? The whole person is disabled. The whole person is less than he or she could be.

It is easy for us to see the problem when it resides with someone else. We talk about the foolishness of Peter to suggest that the ministry of Jesus should consist of building shrines on the mountaintop. We can easily see the danger in a church like Corinth where pagan and Christian thought are blended. We can decry the blending of Christian and pagan thought in some foreign country.

But, we have a hard time understanding the ways that our own culture distorts the message of Jesus. And trust me; it does happen.

I grew up with a picture of Jesus on the Sunday school wall that looked a whole lot like the people I knew ... except for the long flowing hair and beard. Alongside the picture of Jesus was a framed American Flag that flown over the capital along with a letter from our beloved Senator, Robert Byrd of West Virginia.

To me that was very symbolic. Jesus was one of us. His hairstyle was a bit different, but I was assured that had he lived in our day he would have worn a nice crew cut and a thin black tie. Jesus was a very tame American hero who just happened to live in the Middle East long ago.

I like the way Philip Yancey describes this phenomena in his book, The Jesus I Never Knew. Yancey tells of reading a book written by an elderly Charles Dickens. In that book Dickens attempted to sum up the Christian faith for his grandchildren. Jesus emerged as a kind of sweet, Victorian nanny who patted the children on the head and said; "Now children, you must be nice to your mummy and daddy."

He said that he realized that this was the Jesus of us his youth. His picture of Jesus was that calm looking individual who tended to the little lamb and

welcomed the little children. According to Yancey, Jesus was portrayed as a kind of Mr. Rogers before the advent of children's television ... a benign character who gave him a sense of comfort and security during those early years.

But, as he got older Yancey outgrew that image of Christ. He began to ask questions like, "What government would want to crucify Mr. Rogers or Captain Kangaroo just for telling people to be nice?"

Obviously there was more to Jesus than his youthful impression. And that led to a deeper understanding of Jesus. For the first time in a long time he began to really listen to Jesus, the real Jesus that he had never known.

GROWING UP TO GOD

There are many people who never get beyond that first childish impression of Jesus. There are many people who have a faith that never grows.

And so, as these people get older Jesus just seems less and less relevant. Church going is a kind of habit or is abandoned altogether. Faith for this group is kid stuff, and the real Jesus is never heard.

But, sometimes by the grace of God their life is interrupted by the voice of God. Some dramatic or even traumatic event occurs, and for the first time in a long time people attempt to really listen to Jesus. Has this ever happened to you?

Have you ever had your voice interrupted by the voice of God? Has there ever been a time in your life when you realized that somehow you had missed what was most important? I know that's been true for me on several occasions. Something big happens in my life, and I realize how foolish and unreflective I have been.

Actually, I think that we grow and mature spiritually in the same way that we grow and mature physically and spiritually. How did the Apostle Paul put it? "When I was a child I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult I put away childish things." 1 Corinthians 13:11

Paul was comparing the maturation process to the process of spiritual growth. Just as we "grow up" so we grow up to God so to speak. There is a process of

spiritual development that occurs as we get older and are able to hear and appreciate the voice of God.

People often think that they have no need for God. But, let a tragedy occur, and I guarantee that even the most jaded person is listening for a word of hope at that funeral. When we pass through the valley of the shadow of death, we are afraid.

OVERSHADOWED BY GOD

And it is interesting to note that Peter, James and John felt the same way when the cloud of God's presence passed over them on the Mount of Transfiguration. The Bible tells us that the cloud of God's presence "overshadowed them." In other words in a New York minute everything changed. In the presence of God their sinfulness and their foolish desires were entirely evident to them.

I am reminded of the appearances of God to the prophets of the Old Testament. Do you remember how they responded to God's presence? They were scared to death.

For example the prophet Isaiah had a vision of God in the temple, and in response he said, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" Isaiah 6:5 (NRSV)

In our lesson for today, when the voice of God speaks from the cloud and commends Jesus, Peter, James and John fall flat on their face in utter terror. The Bible tells us they were overcome by fear.

Many of us know what it means to be overcome with fear. Our doctor brings us bad news, a loved one dies, or we realize too late that the oncoming car is in our lane. In a moment life can change forever. In a moment we can be overwhelmed by fear and dread.

And the Bible tells us that this is not only true when we face danger but also when we come face to face with God. The Psalmist said that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." In other words, quite often we don't begin to really listen to God until we are flat on face or flat on our back.

It's then that the struggle to believe, the struggle to listen to Jesus is a life and death struggle. It is not just one more thing on our list of things to do. It is the only thing worth doing.

How can we learn to listen to Jesus instead of just hearing his words? Today's lesson suggests some possibilities.

CLIMB A HIGH MOUNTAIN

First, we need to climb a high mountain. No, I'm not saying that we need to move closer to West Virginia because it's almost heaven ... as much as I would like to say that being a mountaineer myself. I'm saying that we have to set aside time to listen to Jesus and open our hearts to what He might teach us. The mountaintop is that place where we go to meet Jesus

Someone in our Bible study suggested that the words of the old hymn, *Take Time to Be Holy* illustrate this point. "Take time to be holy, speak oft of his word ..."

In the middle of a very busy ministry, Jesus always took time to get away and pray. Jesus listened for the voice of his heavenly Father. And Jesus encouraged his disciples to do the same thing. He taught them to listen for God's voice. He took Peter, James and John up the high mountain away from all distractions in order to hear God's voice.

Many of your young people hear the voice of God for the first time when they go away to a church camp. It's something about being in nature away from the familiar routines of life that enables us to see more clearly.

Many of you speak of "mountaintop experiences" that is, times in your life when you felt the power and presence of God in a deeper, stronger way. Perhaps it was some type of spiritual retreat weekend. Perhaps it was some overwhelming personal experience.

Some of you have never experienced a moment like this. That doesn't mean you don't believe. Some of us have dramatic conversion experiences like the Apostle Paul on the road to Damascus. And some of us are like his protege, Timothy. We grow up in the faith and just gradually mature into disciples of Christ.

But, experience is not the final judge of faith. We can have amazing experiences and revelations and still misunderstand the will of God as revealed in Christ. Just witness Peter talking about setting up permanent shrines on the mountain.

Peter had experienced an amazing spiritual vision, but he had no clue about what it meant because he was not listening to Jesus. He was in love with the sound of his own voice.

The first step in hearing the voice of Jesus is to go up to the mountaintop, take that time to be holy and really listen for the voice of God as revealed in his Son Jesus. In the Bible we read this command, “Be still and know that I am God.” Psalm 46:10

DON'T STAY ON THE MOUNTAIN TOO LONG

But, it's also important not to stay on the mountain too long. Ironically, if we concentrate too much on listening to Jesus we cannot hear him. We listen not only by seeking a spiritual experience but also by getting up and finding the courage to follow Jesus down the mountain to the valley below. We find Jesus in the human face of need.

To say it another way, the journey inward must always be followed by the journey outward.

In today's Scripture that point comes when Jesus touches the disciples and tells them not to be afraid. The disciples look up and things are back to normal. The vision of Moses and Elijah and the transfigured Christ are gone. They see only Jesus. And Jesus leads them down the mountain.

And on the way down Jesus warns them to tell no one about this vision until after “the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.” The vision of glory will not make sense unless it is set in the context of the cross and the resurrection. Only after the disciples make the journey to the cross and beyond with Jesus will they be able to understand what it really means to worship.

Until that time, like Peter they will be prone to misunderstand and talk when they should be quiet. They will think that the kingdom of God is about personal glory or political power or some spiritual high.

But, the Jesus they will discover on the way to the cross will be much more. He will be the suffering servant, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Only through struggle with the pain and sin of the world will this become clear for the disciples. And I think that's true for us as well.

COMPASSIONATE LISTENING

As we begin the season of Lent we too are invited to really listen to Jesus. We listen to him not only in going to worship and reading the Word but also in acts of compassion for others. As Christ gave himself to a broken and sinful world, so we are called to take up our cross and follow him.

Philip Yancey tells of watching an old movie, *Whistle Down the Wind* starring Hayley Mills. She and two friends are playing in a country barn and stumble across a vagrant sleeping in the straw. The little girl asks firmly, "Who are you?" The vagrant is jerked awake by her question and seeing the children mutters, "Jesus Christ."

What he meant as an expletive the children take literally. They actually believe that he is Jesus Christ. And for the rest of the movie they treat the vagrant with awe, respect and love. They bring him blankets and food to eat. And in time their tenderness transforms the vagrant ... an escaped convict who has never known such mercy.

Mills mother wrote the story as an allegory of what might happen if we took literally Jesus' words about helping the poor and needy. The world as we know it might be transformed.

Mother Teresa who served the poorest of the poor in India put it this way. She said, "First we meditate on Jesus, and then we go out and look for him in disguise." We listen to Jesus not only with our ears but also with our feet and hands as we follow and serve in his name.

How many people have been changed when they find the courage to minister in the name of Jesus? That's the beginning of true transformation. That's when we begin to hear Jesus in a deep way that goes beyond words, a way that penetrates to our very soul.

TRANSFIGURED DISCIPLES

You know, when you think about it, Jesus was not really changed on that mountain long ago. Jesus was revealed. For a moment the disciples were just allowed to see Jesus for who he really was ... the Son of God. The Messiah disguised in the clothes of humanity was revealed in all his glory.

But, that revelation did bring about a total change, a transfiguration. The ones who were really transfigured were the disciples. They were transfigured by a new vision.

They went down that mountain with a new set of priorities and a new identity. On some level I think they were beginning to understand.

As disciples of Christ they too were God's sons. They too enjoyed the favor of God. That favor was not to be wasted on mountaintop shrines or endless worship services. That favor was to be passed around to a broken and sinful world.

Christ touched them. Christ lifted them up. Christ told them not to be afraid. And then they followed him down the mountain.

Maybe they were beginning to understand that this is what they were called to do too.

In the name of Christ they too were called to touch others. They too were called to lift people to their feet. They too were called to ease the fear of those who have been overwhelmed by life.

On another mountain the risen Christ would confirm this feeling. He would tell the disciples that they were to bring the good news into the whole world, helping others to hear the gospel and also put it into action. That, after all, is what it means to be a disciple.

And then Jesus gave them one more promise. He said in effect,

“Do you remember that mountaintop experience? Do you remember that time when you felt the power and presence of God?”

That power and presence of God is with you always, and I am with you always. I am with you even until the end of the earth.”
(Matthew 28:18-19)

KEEP ON LISTENING

When the voice from heaven told the disciples to listen to Jesus, that word listen is in the present imperative indicating continual or repeated action. In other words, God was telling those disciples to “keep on listening to Jesus” or “continue to listen to Jesus.” Listening to Jesus is not a once and done deal. It’s a continuous journey.

We think we understand the message of the mountaintop. We who live on the other side of the resurrection might feel smug in our knowledge about Jesus. But, our lack of understanding shines through in that we still are more into shrine building than kingdom building. Someone once said that we in the church have an edifice complex. We think that we can get to heaven by building great cathedrals.

But, our building projects are often interrupted by God. And we learn that the kingdom is about more than just being successful and nice. The kingdom is about more than impressive experiences and great building projects.

The kingdom is about listening to Jesus. The kingdom is about trying to discern what God is doing in our world and then becoming a part of the journey.

That first trip to Jerusalem was a rocky road ... full of danger and disaster. Do you think the road today will be any different? But, Jesus bids us follow. During this season of Lent lets come down the mountain with Jesus and take that trip once again.

Amen.